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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000459

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: PML-N WINS IN HOTLY CONTESTED NATIONAL ASSEMBLY  
BY-ELECTION

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) won the February 24 by-election for the National Assembly seat in Rawalpindi (NA-55) vacated by Haji Pervez Khan. The PML-N soundly defeated long-time politician Sheikh Rashid Ahmed who was elected from that constituency six times before and who had initially lost his seat in the 2008 general elections. The election was billed as a possible bell-weather poll of PML-N's popularity given its recent defeat in the Mansehra by-elections. The NA-55 poll result has put the PML-N in a stronger position to win the upcoming by-election in NA-123 in Lahore. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On February 24, after weeks marked by heated campaigning, an attack on one of the main candidates, and accusations of vote rigging, the PML-N succeeded in securing the National Assembly seat in Rawalpindi (NA-55) vacated by Haji Pervez Khan. Khan had resigned his seat in NA-55 in May ¶2009. Rawalpindi, Pakistan's fourth largest city and home to the Pakistan Army, is Islamabad's twin city situated in Punjab province with a reported population of about 2 million people. Constituency NA-55 reportedly has about 333,872 registered voters.

¶3. (U) Of the 22 candidates in the NA-55 by-elections, the key candidates were Sheikh Rashid Ahmed of the Awami Muslim League and Malik Shakeel Awan of the PML-N. Ahmed is a long-time, well-known politician who was first elected to the National Assembly from Rawalpindi in 1985 and subsequently won that seat five consecutive times; he lost his seat in the National Assembly in 2008. Awan, a former Union Council Nazim (mayor), has been described as a loyal PML-N party worker, and is new to the national political scene.

¶4. (U) Awan soundly defeated Ahmed with a significant margin, reportedly garnering about 63,888 votes to Ahmed's 42,530 votes. While conceding defeat, Ahmed has accused the PML-N of rigging the polls and called the election a "victory for Punjab police," which he accused of being part of the overall PML-N-led provincial government machinery that ensured his opponent's win.

¶5. (C) The lead up to the NA-55 polls was not without its share of drama. On February 8, Sheikh Rashid Ahmed was injured in a shooting outside of his election office. Three individuals were killed in the attack, while Ahmed escaped with an injured leg. Some interlocutors suggested, sometimes in jest, the possibility that Ahmed was himself behind the

attack in order to garner sympathy votes. The shooting incident is still under investigation.

¶6. (U) The Election Commission of Pakistan released a statement applauding the peaceful conduct of the NA-55 polls and reported that "no complaint was received from any quarter." The Free and Fair Election Network (a coalition of about 30 local civil society organizations), which monitored the NA-55 election, released a preliminary report in which it observed a 35.9% voter turnout; reports of some restrictions on election observers; noted possible ballot stuffing and fraudulent voting in some polling stations; and detailed anecdotes of the unauthorized presence of security officials inside of polling stations. Despite these concerns, FAFEN attributed some of these irregularities to the possible lack of training of election staff and their awareness about election laws.

¶7. (C) Billed as a possible bell-weather election of PML-N's popularity, the NA-55 poll was closely watched by political observers. One news outlet depicted this election as the National Reconciliation Ordinance versus the Charter of Democracy. In other words, some saw this election as symbolic of the ongoing political rivalry between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government and the leading opposition PML-N. Even though the PPP agreed not to field a candidate for this election, and despite its pronouncement that it would not campaign for Ahmed, the party reportedly tacitly supported Ahmed's candidacy. PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif claimed during a victory speech following Awan's win that PPP flags were openly used in Ahmed's campaigning.

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Consequently, Ahmed's defeat is also seen by some as the PPP's defeat.

¶8. (C) Despite some of the media hype surrounding Sheikh Rashid's ability to wrest control of NA-55 from PML-N, PML-N members quietly remained confident of securing this seat. On the day of the poll, while attending a tea at the DCM's for young parliamentary leaders preparing to go on an International Visitors Leadership Program, Sardar Faiz Tamman, a PML-N Member of the National Assembly (MNA) and second-term MNA, boldly predicted that not only would Awan beat Ahmed, but that he would do so by a large margin.

¶9. (C) PML-N needed to have a good showing in the NA-55 poll following its defeat in the Mansehra NA-21 by-election on January 28, won by Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) candidate Laiq Muhammad Khan. That seat had previously been held by deceased PML-N member Faiz Muhammad Khan. Analysts characterized the NA-55 as somewhat of a harbinger of things to come for PML-N in future elections; that if the party failed to win in this election, it could spell doom for the party as it would signal its sinking popularity. Losing this seat on its home turf of the Punjab would have been an embarrassing defeat for the PML-N and would have no doubt triggered some alarm within the party.

¶10. (C) Comment: Ahmed is said to be close to Pakistan's establishment (military and ISI), therefore, the fact that he was defeated indicates it did not come out in his favor. It is our understanding that the ISI did not actively engage in manipulating these polls. PML-N's win in NA-55 has set the stage for Jamaat-e-Islami supporting it in the more significant upcoming by-election in NA-123 in Lahore. Pervaiz Malik, a close associate of Nawaz and former member of the National Assembly, will be contesting those polls on March 10 as Nawaz bowed out of running in this election. Given the NA-55 poll results, and barring any major unforeseen event, Malik's chances of returning to the National Assembly are fairly high. End Comment.  
PATTERSON